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ABSTRACT

The counseling profession is at the beginning of a growing trend to utilize computer technology for a widening variety of needs. One of the most important needs is for the delivery of accessible and affordable continuing education. Another need is for more on-line continuing education programs on a wider variety of topics. Transmission and storage of continuing education credits are also areas of need that are currently not being widely addressed. Increasing use of the Internet for continuing education purposes will not diminish the need for live conferences and training but may alter their format to accommodate the need for Internet transmission. This chapter first discusses the history and trends in continuing education in the counseling profession, focusing on home study programs with particular attention to Web-based continuing education. Web sites are then listed and briefly reviewed. Recommendations for those developing continuing education related programs and services are provided. Guidelines for creating continuing education programs on the Internet include surfing to determine what is currently being offered, clear identification, and simple instruction and navigation. Guidelines for continuing education services such as credit storage banks include researching for similar services, carefully gauging financial and staff resources, and getting expert advice on future trends. (MKA)

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Technology and the Continuing Education of Professional Counselors

By
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Technology and the Continuing Education of Professional Counselors

PAMELA S. LEARY

Continuing education for professional counselors is in a state of metamorphosis. How can professional associations, universities, institutes, trainers, and educators deliver high-quality continuing education to increasing numbers of credentialed counselors in diverse geographic areas? Similarly, how can counselors find high-quality continuing education when they are facing the challenges of remote location, family and job demands, financial constraints, illness, and other circumstances that make attendance at live conferences, workshops, and training programs very difficult? How can technology help us to answer these needs?

This chapter first discusses the history and trends in continuing education in the counseling profession, focusing on home study programs with particular attention to web-based continuing education. Web sites are then listed and briefly reviewed, and recommendations for those developing continuing-education-related-programs and services on the web are provided.

HISTORY

Since the beginning of education, the method of disseminating knowledge to the population of practicing professionals has been the conference or convention. Presenting papers and research findings at professional conferences has long been a rite of passage for most professionals. Add to that smaller workshops, training insti-

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tutes, and seminars, and the picture of continuing education up until the early 1990s is complete.

The single factor most responsible for changing this picture is the growth of credentialing in our profession. With credentialing has come the need for continuing education hours for recredentialing. There are now 30,000 National Certified Counselors (NCCs) in the United States who "all need 100 hours of continuing education in every 5-year certification cycle" (Leary, 1998). There are also approximately 55,000 state licensed counselors, most of whom must accrue continuing education to maintain their professional credentials. Thus professional counselors consume somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,700,000 hours of continuing education every year. Counselors who live in remote areas, have heavy family or work demands, live with chronic or transitory illnesses, or are under financial constraints may find obtaining traditional continuing education a serious challenge.

Realization of these facts has led continuing education providers to develop ways for counselors to make continuing education more accessible and affordable than traveling to conferences or attending workshops or training programs.

> The new focus on accessibility and required hours created two significant changes in the world of continuing education. . . . The first was an increase in the number of workshops and training institutes. . . . In addition, there has been an explosion in the world of home study. (Leary, 1998)

The number of home study programs approved by the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) has grown from about 20 in 1992 to over 150 in 1999. Most of these are books or audiotapes with quizzes. There are also videotapes with quizzes and one program that uses a compact disk. Since the late 1970s, live programs have been broadcast to remote locations for teleconferences via satellite or closed circuit television. The most logical next step for continuing education providers was to begin to offer continuing education over the Internet. According to Thomas J. Bacon, director of the North Carolina Areas Health Education Centers Program,

> Technology can increase individualized contact, communication, and interaction with our traditional learners. Telecommunications and access to the Internet can also overcome barriers of geographic isolation, helping those in rural and underserved areas access information and education resources when and where they choose. (1998)

THE WEB: A NEW SOURCE FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION

The NBCC received its first application for approval of an Internet-based continuing education program in early 1997. The company, Distance Learning Network (DLN), is still one of the more unique and specialized sites offering continuing education for counselors. DLN (www.dlnetwork.com) took the idea of the interactive teleconference and adapted it for the Internet.

Several other organizations have followed. In the spring of 1997, the NBCC affiliate, the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE), made the decision to develop an on-line continuing education course. Thomas Clawson, executive director of both NBCC and CCE, has stated that "CCE wants to be on the cutting edge of continuing education delivery for professional counselors. We are committed to helping to set the standard for this new medium" (personal communication, May 14, 1999).

The Laurasian Institution was selected to develop the web site for CCE. Case studies were used as the basis for the program. Counselors read the case studies and then answer a series of questions about each one. If a counselor answers incorrectly, an explanation is given and the counselor is directed back to the part of the case that he or she has misunderstood. This continues until a correct answer is chosen. Because of this format, failure is impossible. The counselor can register, pay, take the program, and print out the certificate of completion all on-line. So far, according to Clawson, "The program has not yet had enough registrants to totally pay for its development, but we think that picture will improve as more counselors become computer literate and more aware of the opportunities for continuing education on the Internet" (personal communication, May 14, 1999).

WHAT IS OUT THERE?

As more counselors become comfortable with computers as learning instruments, and as they become familiar with the Internet, there will be increasing numbers of professionals looking for continuing education opportunities on the Internet. In an effort to discover the current picture, this chapter's author completed a search for on-line continuing education for counselors and other mental health professionals using ERIC (www.uncg.edu/edu/ericcass), Yahoo (www.yahoo.com), and Ask Jeeves (www.askjeeves.com) as search engines. The results of the search are the sites listed and described in this section. In considering the thousands of continuing education live events offered each year and the hundreds of traditional home study programs available on a continuous basis, it may be somewhat disappointing to see only 10 sites listed. There are certainly more sites available than those found by the search engines. The Associated Press, for example, has reported that "A study found that search engines . . . cover a diminishing fraction of web pages and take a long time to list new sites" ("Search Engines," 1999). A similar report on National Public Radio stated that search engines find only about 16% of the web sites on a particular topic. Therefore, the list of continuing education sites for mental health professionals that follows should not be thought of as complete but only as a starting place for further exploration.

- **Dimensions in Mental Health Practice** (www.dmhp.org): Sponsored by the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE), an affiliate of the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC), this web site contains one NBCC-approved learning module:
  — Clinical Skills for Mental Health Professionals
  Registration and credit are available on-line. The course is a series of case studies with interactive quizzes after each one. Three hours of credit may be earned.
- **Trance*Sand*Dance Press** (www.psychceu.com): These NBCC-approved home study programs are available on the web site of this New Mexico organization. The web site is easy for the novice user to navigate and is visually pleasing as well. Two programs are available:

— Reweaving the Web: The Treatment of Substance Abuse; and
— Sandplay, The Sacred Healing: A Guide to Symbolic Process.
Not all of the functions are on-line yet, but the developers are working to make all aspects of each program available on their site.

- **Mental Health InfoSource** (MHI) (www.mhsource.com): Awards include LA Times "Times Pick," Select Surf "Best of the Web," and Snap Search "Editor's Choice." The site is associated with the psychiatric profession and has these features:
  — *The Psychiatric Times* newsletter is on-line and available for 1 hour of CE credit.
  — One on-line course—Progress in Psychopharmacology: Psychotic Disorders Update—offers the quiz on-line and mails the certificate afterward. No cost!
  — Another on-line course—Clinical Puzzles for 18 hours credit—consists of case studies and an interactive posttest, plus viewing discussion between participants and an expert on a bulletin board.
  — Professionals can hear the entire recorded conference "Practical Psychopharmacology Update," view the transcribed text, and then take an interactive posttest for 16 hours of credit. Fours sessions are available at 4 hours each at $49 per session.
  — On-line registration for conferences worldwide is available.
- **American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy** (www.aamft.org): AAMFT has a full range of services and opportunities on this site. Features include
  — an on-line course, Brief Therapy: Essential Elements, Concepts, and Techniques, offered through the University of Colorado at Denver for three graduate credits. Registration is on-line as well.
  — registration forms available on-line as well as conference programs. Information on sessions, costs, and location is also available.
- **Behavior On-Line** (www.behavior.net): BOL has several NBCC-approved courses that are hosted on the audiopsyche site. BOL is responsible for awarding the NBCC-approved continuing education credit. There are four courses:

— Listening to Prozac;
— Cognitive Therapy for Personality Disorders;
— Complex PTSD and Incest/Child Sexual Abuse: Approaches to Treatment; and
— Mind-Body Mastery Over Surgery.

- **Distance Learning Network** (www.dlnetwork.com): The first web-based continuing education organization to be approved by NBCC to offer live programs broadcast over the Internet. These programs are similar to teleconferences and are auditory, visual, and interactive. Their site lists upcoming events and gives information for registration.
- **PsyBC, the Psy Broadcasting Corporation** (www.psybc.com): This award-winning, NBCC-approved site has a unique format. It sponsors four programs to which counselors subscribe. The topics of the programs are
  — cognitive behavior therapy;
  — psychoanalysis;
  — group therapy; and
  — psychopharmacology for psychotherapists.
  Each month an expert in the field leads an on-line discussion through e-mail in which participants may read the comments as well as make comments or ask questions of their own. Printed copies of the articles discussed are available. Continuing education credit is earned monthly for those who wish to purchase it.
- **Institute for Behavioral Healthcare** (www.ibh.com): This organization is a division of the Institute for the Advancement of Human Behavior (IAHB), which is approved by the NBCC. However, the on-line programs offered by the Institute for Behavioral Healthcare have not been submitted to NBCC for approval. The IAHB site has a listing of their live workshops and on-line registration. The Institute for Behavioral Healthcare site has four on-line courses available for credit:
  — The Ethical Way;
  — Who Owns the Data?;
  — Treating Childhood Depressive Illness; and
  — Redecision Therapy.

- **Internet Guides Press** (www.virtualcs.com): This site, built by mental health professional David Lukoff, helps guide other professionals through Internet searches for information, products, and services that assist counselors and therapists in their work. One course is offered:
  — Navigating the Mental Health Internet.
  A page of helpful links is available, and purchasers receive a copy of the site author's book on the same topic.
- **CyberEd** (www.isg-cybered.com): This site is the on-line campus of the International Seminars Group. Features on the site include a calendar of live events, a library of materials, a bookstore, and two web-based continuing education programs entitled
  — Avengers, Conquerors, Playmates, And Lovers: Roles Played by Child Sexual Abuse Perpetrators; and
  — Assessing Violent Couples.
  Articles on these programs are available on-line along with the quiz, which then must be e-mailed to the sponsor. The fee must be mailed by regular post.
- **The Institute of Natural Sciences** (www.ccourses.com): This site has correspondence courses in various areas of study, including counseling, that are available in traditional correspondence format or by e-mail. The courses can be ordered and paid for on-line.
- **New York University** (www.scps.nyu.edu/): This site is sponsored by NYU's School of Continuing and Professional Studies. They have over 45 courses available on-line. This is a site found through Peterson's Publishing, which produces *Peterson's Guide to Distance Learning Programs* (www.petersons.com). Only one course is for human service professionals:
  — Introduction to HIV Mental Health: A Primer for Counseling.
  The site is easy to navigate and instructions for registering on-line are unusually clear. This is a very good site for the novice user.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

As cybertechnology makes instant communication more common, possibilities that continuing education providers and creden-

tialing boards should be considering as we move into the new millennium include

- methods for on-line and traditional continuing education providers to send continuing education credit directly to certification and licensing boards;
- more interactive courses allowing counselors to dialogue with one another as well as with experts in the field (see www.psybc.com);
- on-line record-keeping services for counseling professionals who wish to have electronic continuing education credit storage;
- more live conferences, seminars, and even training programs on the Internet with audio and visual capabilities (see www.dlnetwork.com); and
- Internet-based visual and auditory supervision of practicing counselors as well as counseling interns.

As Internet technology makes these and other possibilities become realities, leaders in our profession may question the effect this will have on the traditional forums for continuing education such as conferences, workshops, and training institutes. Because these events provide opportunities and services that the on-line world cannot, such as networking, purchasing professional products, spontaneous discourse with colleagues and leaders, and participation in the political process of the profession, it is logical to assume that the world of live meetings will not fade. However, it is also logical to assume that they will be shaped by the need to broadcast them live over the Internet. One speculation is that home-based conference attendees could as easily attend plenary sessions and committee meetings by computer as they can now via the conference telephone call.

Recommended Actions and Start-Up Strategies

This chapter's author encourages any continuing education provider who has home study programs to consider placing some or all of them on the web, if the format allows. Currently, the selection of on-line continuing education programs is rather small. Every year, several thousand counselors and other mental health professionals need to earn hours for recertification or relicensure. Every

year, a certain number of counselors wait until the end of their certification/licensure period before they become aware that they need continuing education hours in very short order. Every year the NBCC recertification administrator grants extensions of time to NCCs who have experienced extenuating circumstances so that they may complete the continuing education requirements. The need is there. Now the profession must decide how to meet the need.

Recommendations

For any organization planning to launch an Internet-based continuing education program, the following recommendations are offered.

1. Surf the Web thoroughly before making any business decisions. Get help with this, if necessary, to ensure getting a real picture of what is already being done.
2. Contact others who have done similar projects. Most professionals are very willing to share their experiences.
3. Make it very clear what organization is the sponsor of the site and how to get in touch with that organization by phone, fax, e-mail, and ground mail.
4. Make the navigation instructions simple enough for the *most inexperienced user*. The last thing wanted is for those counselors who probably already have too much on their plates to feel frustrated by the site.
5. If the program is a small part of a very large operation, make it easy to move off the front page to the program site.
6. Unclutter the program site: the cleaner the better. See the Trance*Sand*Dance Press site at www.psychceu.com for a good example of a fledgling effort that is both elegant and rich. Only one program is up at this time, but the site is so easy to navigate that it seems sure that users will return to catch the second program as soon as it is available.

It is worth mentioning that the periodical *Association Management* (Cox & Chon, 1996) has an excellent article describing the initial effort of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) to create an on-line symposium for its members. Their pointers and cautions are well worth reading before venturing into

the world of on-line continuing education. One excellent recommendation made by AOTA was to "thoroughly test the downloading process" before posting the program or event. This is especially important for programs that will feature large text files designed for the user to print.

For organizations that are considering web-based services to counselors, recommendations are as follows.

1. Surf the web thoroughly to find out if there are other similar services competing for the same constituency.
2. Speak to others who have done similar projects to determine how much staff time and funding this project may take over the long term.
3. Compare that information with current staff, their technological expertise, and their workload before making the decision to begin such a project.
4. Get some expert advice on the long-term viability of the service. It is important to consider whether or not the service will be antiquated in 3 years or 10 years.

CONCLUSION

The counseling profession is at the beginning of a growing trend to utilize computer technology for a widening variety of needs. One of the most important is for the delivery of accessible and affordable continuing education. Another need is for more on-line continuing education programs on a wider variety of topics. Transmission and storage of continuing education credit are also areas of need that are currently not being widely addressed. Increasing use of the Internet for continuing education purposes will not diminish the need for live conferences and training but may alter their format to accommodate the need for Internet transmission.

Guidelines for continuing education providers planning on creating continuing education programs on the Internet include surfing to determine what is currently being offered, clear identification, and simple instruction and navigation. Guidelines for continuing education services such as credit storage banks include researching for similar services, carefully gauging financial and staff resources, and getting expert advice on future trends.

As Thomas Clawson has stated, "there is beginning to be a shift from training for training's sake to training for better job opportunities and higher salary for human service professionals" (personal communication, May 14, 1999). Considering this fact, the world of continuing education in cyberspace can only gain importance in the never-ending effort to make human service professionals respected and competitive in the new millennium.

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